

A little intro to Bourdieu (Boor-d'yew)

The late Pierre Bourdieu was a major French sociologist and thinker whose work has been influential in many other areas: anthropology, education, cultural analysis, etc. *Distinction* is his major work on art and social stratification. It can be understood as a theoretical and practical “reading” of survey data based on interviews with a range of the French population in the early 60s. You can see much of the data and analysis based on the data in the appendixes and in tables in the book. There is also a fair amount of elaboration of key points in passages printed in smaller type.

It might be a bit confusing if you don't know or understand anything about French society and culture while reading the book. For example, when he discusses levels of educational achievement, he refers to the French system of diplomas for each level...it is like grade school, high school, tech school, liberal arts college, grad school, etc. You can easily see that his point is that working class people have less time and certification in education than professionals like doctors and lawyers. If you've lived in France or studied French culture, you may pick up on much of it fairly easily. Although he makes his argument in terms of France, it is, like the U.S., an advanced industrial capitalist country, and in general the same structures are found..

In terms of approaching art, Bourdieu's major and most controversial argument in *Distinction* is a critique of the dominant Western aesthetic tradition in the capitalist epoch, that is the philosophical position of the 18th century philosopher Kant who argued that the understanding and appreciation of art took place in a separate realm of the mind that was autonomous from everyday concerns. Thus art and craft are separate; things which are “useful” and “purposeful” such as pottery and wallpaper are of a distinctly lower order than things which are just to be appreciated as autonomous art objects or experiences. Thus marching band music is of a lower order than symphony hall music. This argument was powerful in its own time for establishing the autonomy of the artist, who in feudal times had been a servant of patrons (royalty, the church, or merchant class), and the specialness of art. In many ways it is like the Protestant view of religion: that one can establish a one-to-one relation with the divine without the intervention of a church organization. By separating art from society, Kant's ideas helped fuel the Romantic movement in the arts and provided a philosophical justification and explanation for the uniqueness of the art experience and of art itself. Kant's ideas today are the dominant ideas about art in intellectual circles and art schools and form the defense of the high art tradition. Linked to 20th C. modernism, Kant's general ideas inform positions such as “the true subject of art is art itself” or “art explores its nature as art” (as for example in justifications for Abstract Expressionist painting, structural/minimal experimental film, etc.)

Against this set of ideas, Bourdieu is trying to argue that “taste” is not simply a matter of aesthetic education, experience, and an innate ability of the mind, but is in fact socially constructed and determined and criss-crossed with factors of class.

Bourdieu's general importance in thinking about mass culture is that he offers a social analysis which gives a fuller understanding of taste publics, and how class and other factors operate to shape cultural activity, including consumption. The biggest drawback to Bourdieu's analysis for our purposes is that he doesn't use a data base with much television viewing or ownership. In some ways, the development of a tv culture in the US may have qualitatively changed the situation, culturally and socially.

Basic ideas

- aesthetic experience must be understood in terms of its social context.
- we must understand all cultural objects, not just high culture ones, in examining cultural and aesthetic life.
- there are various lifestyles which people use in cultural experience [elaborate here, the relation of lifestyle, subculture, consumption culture, class, race, and ethnic culture.]
- intellectuals tend to separate art, culture, from everyday experience, for them it is an intellectual experience. [Bodily culture: cuisine, the domestic environment, creature comforts, tend to be women's responsibility within the family division of labor.] Sports and exercise represent the other side of this: turned into a leisure industry, bodily experience separated from the everyday. Or brought back into it through an activity called health. Is psychotherapy another form of this separation of emotion and mind from body?
- working class rejection of bourgeois standards of domestic environment, makeup, etc. [to what extent is this generational? compare Hebdidge on style in youth subcultures.]

How are lifestyles produced under capitalism?

How does tv shape lifestyle and consumption style?

Does the concept of tv demographics help us understand different audiences?